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Mon *raʔ* and *noŋ*: Assertive particles?*

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Abstract

The two Mon clause particles *raʔ* and *noŋ* have both been described by most authors as expressing assertion, sometimes with a temporal, modal or aspectual connotation. They are widely seen to be mutually exclusive, occupying the same syntactic slot in clause final position.

In this paper a closer look is taken at the two morphemes and their functions and distribution. One of them, *raʔ*, is shown not to be an assertive marker, as it occurs in clearly non-assertive contexts such as interrogatives and imperatives. The author analyses *raʔ* as a marker of focus (wide or narrow), which can be used to mark whole predicates, verbal and nominal, or parts of them. In some contexts temporal connotations have arisen, partly due to areal influence.

The other morpheme discussed here, *noŋ*, is seen as an assertive marker which has developed modal (assumptive) and temporal (future) connotations or implicatures in some contexts, again under areal influence from strong neighbouring languages.

The data used to show the historical and functional development of the two particles are drawn from a wide range of sources, including Old Mon and Middle Mon as well as the modern literary and spoken languages.

1. Background studies

The two Mon particles *raʔ* and *noŋ* deserve detailed investigation. Earlier descriptions of Mon mostly analyse the two as assertive markers, usually assigning a past/present notion to *raʔ* and future or “limited assertion” to *noŋ*. Of the two, *raʔ* occurs more frequently, as it can stand in virtually any sentence in clause (or phrase) final position. The use of *noŋ* is more restricted, as we will see. First I will give an overview of earlier treatments of the two particles under discussion here and then turn to some theoretical considerations and definitions. When quoting other authors, the spelling of the original sources is retained.¹

*This paper is part of a research project sponsored by Zurich University from 2001-2004. It is adapted from a chapter of the resulting study on the verb system of Mon by the author (Jenny 2005), where full reference of sources (literary and spoken) can be found.

¹In my own examples, I use a standardised phonemic transcription of spoken Mon as outlined in Jenny (2005:33ff) and a transliteration according to common usage in Southeast Asian linguistics for written sources. For Burmese, the transcription used by Okell (1969) is applied here, with minor adaptations.

(1) raʔ**Haswell** (1901/2002):

2. Verbal Affixes. (a.) Assertive Affixes. [...] <ra> as an assertive affix, when combined with <tuy>, always follows it, when combined with <hā> in the direct question, it stands before it [...] It sometimes adds strength to the verb [...] (implying past recall).

(c.) Imperative Affixes. [...] <ra> is used [in] the imperative when the speaker assumes superiority over the person addressed.

(g.) Closing Affixes. <ra> is often used simply to close a sentence. It seems also to supply the place of the verb *to be* in predicating a quality. (pp. 29ff)

Halliday (1955):

Accidents of Verbs. The accidents of verbs are expressed by words coming before or going after, sometimes called prefixes and affixes. [...] **Affixes** [...] Ra, assertive; emphatic; imperative. (p. xx-xxi)

Ra v.a. [verbal affix] assertive, closing the sentence, in questions it preceeds [sic!] the interrogative particle, also used with the imperative. (p.377)

Shorto (1962):

raʔ ps. [sentence particle] *Particle of unqualified assertion.* [...] *In emphatic use sometimes follows word or phrase in initial prominence position.* (p. 175)

Shorto (1971):

da¹, rarely **daʔ** ps. & ns. *Predicative particle, (1) in verbal sents., perfective, usy. final.* [...] (2) *in nominal sents., usy. followed by attr p.* [...] (3) *otherwise following n., emphatic.* [...] Perh. orig. w[eak] f[orm] /də/ of **das** ‘to be’, the modern vocalism developing under (secondary) stress in final posn. (p. 184f)

(2) noŋ**Haswell** (1901/2002):

<roŋ> v.a. of the future tense. (p. 348)

Frequently the future is shown only by the connection [...] It is also denoted by <roŋ>. (p.28)

<roŋ> is sometimes merely assertive. (p. 30)

Halliday (1955):

Nong, adv. certainly. **Oa ā nong**, I shall certainly go. (p. 179)

Rong, v.a. of the future tense, assertive, emphatic. (p. 384)

Shorto (1962):

noŋ ps. *Particle of future, inferential or limited assertion.* [roŋ, ɲoŋ] (p. 129)

Shorto (1971):

rwoñ, rarely **ron** /ron/ ps. (MM.) *particle closing (esp. final cl. of complex) sent., marking sequential, consequential, or inferential character of assertion; such a cl. is usy. nominalized by the inclusion of ma.* (p. 326)

Bauer (1982) lists **raʔ** and **noŋ** as “Group-I sentence particles”, together with the “completive-perfect” marker **toə** ‘FINISH’:

This group comprises modal and tense particles, *raʔ*, *noŋ*, and *toə*. *noŋ* and *toə* might be interpreted both as tense particles, future and past respectively, but *raʔ* may co-occur only with *toə* and not with *noŋ* (with which it commutes in its position). Although *noŋ* conveys the idea of future events or actions (and this is one of the reasons why it does not collocate with *toə*), its scope is similar to Khmer *nəŋ* (no cognate!) in that it includes eventuality or hypothetical events as well (“would, might”). [...] A further reason for linking *raʔ* and *noŋ* to the same set is that both cannot co-occur with the negative particle *hùʔ*, and are complementary in statements like *ʔa raʔ ha* ‘are you going?’- *ʔa noŋ* ‘yes, I will’. *noŋ* may not occur in relative or absolute questions. [...] *toə* and *noŋ* share the tense-designating function of past and future/hypothetical, respectively, *noŋ* and *raʔ* the assertive function limited/unqualified, and *toə* and *ʔi* combined with *raʔ* an aspectual colouring ‘perfective’. [...] *raʔ* assigns an assertive, unqualified value to a statement, and it is very difficult to render in(to) English; [...] It may also have an aspectual colouring, *nài nɔp ʔa dɛŋ raʔ* ‘Nai Nop has gone to town’, *nài nɔp ʔa dɛŋ* ‘Nai Nop is going/is about to go to town’. [...] That *raʔ* and *noŋ* are exclusively marking aspects can be seen in the behaviour of verbal complexes: *klɛŋ cɔp nù lèʔphun* ‘he has arrived from Lamphun’ [...] *klɛŋ cɔp nù lèʔphun raʔ* ‘he has just arrived ...’, *klɛŋ cɔp nù lèʔphun ʔi raʔ* ‘??’, *klɛŋ cɔp nù lèʔphun toə* ‘he arrived from Lamphun’. The perfective meaning of the arrival is marked in all cases rather by the second position-verb *cɔp* than by the particle *raʔ*; only where *toə* occurs, *raʔ* marks it as an aspectual sequence. *toə* and *ʔi* may not co-occur. [...] *raʔ* cannot fulfill a hortatory function which, in Burma, is *niʔ* (and also sentence-final in position). (pp. 435ff)

In the Mon grammar sketch of his *Mun-Myanma Abhidhan*, Htun Thein (1980) in most cases uses Burmese *thi* (i.e. the literary variant of colloquial *te* ‘NON-FUTURE/REALIS’, s. Okell 1969:424ff) to translate Mon *raʔ*, though he leaves it untranslated in some sentences while in others Burmese *thi* is present where Mon has no sentence final particle. Mon *ron* is consistently rendered in Burmese as *léin-myi*, which according to the *Myanmar-English Dictionary* is a “postpositional marker suffixed to verbs to indicate probable future occurrence (equivalent in usage to auxiliary verb ‘will’)” (Myanmar

Language Commission 1993:458). Okell and Allott (2001:220f) translate *léin-me/léin-myi* as “probably will V, possibly will V, will no doubt V; will V imminently”. The *Myanmar Pocket Dictionary* (Myanmar Language Commission 1999:242,301) explains both *myi* and *léin* as “postverbal future tense markers” (*ǎnaga’ kalá pyá kǎriya nau’ hse’ sǎkà loun*). Other ways to express the same notion in Mon are according to Htun Thein (1980:12) preverbal *krak* and *s-*, which may not co-occur with *ron*, but only with *ra*.

Most authors agree that *raʔ* is an assertive marker in Mon. The definition of an ‘assertive illocutionary point’ as given by Searle and Vanderveken (1985:37) is the following:²

The *assertive* point is to say how things are. More clumsily but more accurately, in utterances with assertive points the speaker presents a proposition as representing an actual state of affairs in the world of the utterance.

In other words, a sentence marked as assertive can be paraphrased by ‘x states that it is true that SENTENCE’. Van Valin (2001:321) distinguishes between “assertions (statements), interrogatives (questions) and imperatives (commands)”. As can already be seen from some of the translations/functions given by earlier authors, Mon *raʔ* does not fit into this definition of an assertive marker. As such it should not occur in interrogative or imperative contexts, both of which are common functions of *raʔ* in SM.

On the other hand, if *noŋ* was to be analysed as a ‘future tense marker’, as some earlier authors suggest, we would expect it to be incompatible with present and past reference (except for relative future in the past), which is not the case. While *noŋ* occurs in present and past contexts, it is incompatible with interrogative and imperative contexts, which makes an analysis as assertive marker at least possible. Both points will be elaborated below.

2. Historical development

Both *raʔ* and *noŋ* are the result of irregular developments from OM/MM.³ The regular modern reflex of OM *da* would be **tɛʔ*, a form that is not attested anywhere in modern Mon. For MM *rwon/ron*, one would expect a form **ròŋ* in SM, again not attested in the dialects. The shift from OM *d* to SM *r* has no parallel, while OM/MM *r-* > modern *n-* is also found in the causative directional OM *ran*, LM *nan* ‘(bring) hither’.⁴ The light register value of both forms is irregular, too, as OM and MM show voiced initials in both cases, which regularly give rise to heavy register in SM. In LM, *raʔ* is written *ra*, *noŋ* is usually spelt *ron*. The more phonetic spelling *non* is becoming more popular in modern texts, though. Halliday, who first published his dictionary in 1922, lists *rong* and *nong* as different words, as does Tun Way (2000).

²For a more recent and detailed discussion of the notion of ‘assertion’ s. Palmer 2001.

³OM = Old Mon, MM = Middle Mon, LM = Literary Mon, SM = Spoken Mon.

⁴The shift from *t* > *d* > *r* is found in colloquial Burmese in intervocalic position.

In the first known Mon inscriptions, dating back to the 6th and 7th centuries, in Thailand, the word <da> does not occur. This may be a coincidence, as the oldest Dvāravatī Mon inscriptions are rather short and not very numerous. The text of the Lopburi inscription shows complete sentences, though, which could, and probably would, end in <da> in later OM. The oldest inscriptions of Thaton (the Trāp and Paṇḍit inscriptions, 11th c.), which were possibly written before the Burmese invasion of Thaton, equally do not make use of <da>. That no trace of <da> is found in the earliest inscriptions is of some importance, as these texts are the only ones in which Burmese influence can be excluded.

Shorto (1971:185) states that OM <da> is perhaps a weak form of the verb <das> ‘to be’. There are no phonological or semantic obstacles to this etymology, especially given the fact that clauses ending with <da> are usually followed by the attributive/relative marker <ma> as illustrated in (1) from the Shweizigon Inscription (Pagán, 11th c.) (Hpei Maung Tin 1965).

- (1) risi bisnū goḥ kuṁ **da** ma skandaṁ
 OM hermit Vishnu that EMPH FOC ATTR PROS:build

 kom ku kuṁ.
 associate OBL 2s
 ‘It is the hermit Vishnu who is going to build it with you.’
 (‘The hermit Vishnu is [the one] who ...’)

More problematic is the syntactic structure of a sentence like (2), taken from the same inscription, if we take <da> to be a weak form of <das>.

- (2) kyāk buddha tarley ’ār nibbān ḍey ḍūñ
 OM holy Buddha lord go Nirvana LOC town

 kusiṇār **da**.
 Kusinara FOC
 ‘The Lord Buddha attained Nirvana at Kusinara.’

Being a SVO-language, the verb in Mon does not normally occur in sentence final position. If <da> originates in the verb <das>, we have to account for its sentence-final position. According to Mon syntax we would expect in the above sentence [?]<das kyāk buddha tarley...> ‘it was that the Lord Buddha ...’ or [?]<da ḍey ḍūñ kusiṇār ...> ‘it was as Kusinara that ...’, instead of <da> in sentence final position. The sentence-final position is probably an indication that already in OM <da> was not understood as verb anymore, but had developed into a particle.

Already in the Pagán inscriptions we find <da> in imperative and prohibitive contexts, as in the following two examples (both from the Shweizigon Inscription) (Hpei Maung Tin 1965):

- (3) smiñ dewatau kuṁ rmiñ **da**!
 OM king god 2s hear FOC
 ‘Hear, king of gods!’

- (4) lah sandeḥ gam **da!**
 OM PROH doubt more FOC
 ‘Don’t doubt anymore!’

The wide range of functions of <da> shows that <da> was grammaticalized to a large extent already in the early Pagán period.

The attested word order with final <da> might exhibit Burmese SOV influence. Pagán of the 11th and 12th centuries, where classical OM was at its height, was a Burmese state, although Mon retained its status as main literary language. We may expect increasing pressure on the Mon language from Burmese, which was the language of the majority. Clause-final verbs with particle function are common in modern Mon (and have been so since MM times). These particle-verbs include the (regular) modern reflex of OM <das>, viz. *təh* ‘to be > be able’, as well as *nùm* ‘to exist, be somewhere, have > have to’ and *toə* ‘finish > PERFECT(IVE)’.

If *raʔ* originates in OM <das>, it might be early evidence of a structural Burmanism in Mon. The intonational pattern of Mon is iambic, which means that stress increases towards the end of a clause or phrase. In this position the secondary strengthening of the weak form <da> /də/ to *raʔ* is not uncommon. What remain to be explained are the irregular development of the initial and register, and the weakening of the particle in sentence final position in the first place.

The other particle under discussion here, *noŋ*, is not attested until MM. According to Bauer *noŋ* has taken the place of the OM aspectual prefix <s->:

This [that *noŋ* includes eventuality or hypothetical events] conforms well with the historical evidence from OM and EMM [early MM] where its corresponding role was taken by the inflectional prefix <s-> marking the hypothetical (OM /’ar/ [sic!] ‘to go’, /s’ar/ [sic!] ‘shall go’, /ket/ ‘to take’, /sket/ ‘shall take’). SM *noŋ*, LMM/LM /roŋ/ (LM roṇ ~ ṇoṇ) emerged later, taking up that function, even if LM shows still the starred [i.e. frozen] prefix <s-> (co-occurrence of this prefix and *noŋ* in classical texts is still to be examined). (1982:436)

Nothing can be said at the time being about the etymology and original semantics of *noŋ*. It does share some characteristics with OM <s->, but as *noŋ* seems to have pragmatic rather than strictly syntactic functions, comparison with evidence from OM inscriptions has to be done with care. OM <s-> is indeed lost in modern Mon (SM as well as LM), but classical LM seems to make correct use of the prefix at least to some extent, while *noŋ* is already well established in the language. In SM there are other means to express future or prospective events, especially auxiliaries, which can be used together with *noŋ*.

As mentioned above, Mon has been influenced to some degree by Burmese and later Thai. As most Mon today are (and for centuries have been) bilingual speakers of Mon and Burmese and/or Thai, the foreign influence can

be seen not only in the vocabulary, but also on a deeper structural level. Mon *raʔ* may have been influenced by the Burmese sentence particle *te* (REALIS), the focal and aspectual particle *tó*, and the nominal predicate marker *pè* (s. Okell 1969:424ff, 441ff, 294ff; Okell and Allott 2001:94ff, 77ff, 121f). This does not mean that *raʔ* is derived from or modelled on any particular Burmese particle, but rather that the Burmese sentence structure ('the urge to end a clause with something') may have influenced the structure of Mon.

On a more concrete level, *noŋ* appears to be functionally modelled on the Burmese sentence particle *me* (IRREALIS), with which it shares many functions, and of which it is a standard translation (Okell 1969:354ff; Okell and Allott 2001:157ff). There are important differences, though, such as the incompatibility of the Burmese particle with nominal predicates, where Mon *noŋ* is common and the incompatibility of Mon *noŋ* with interrogatives.

Besides regular contact between Mon and Thai since at least the 13th century, the later Mon population in Thailand has been under linguistic pressure from their hosts for two hundred years and more. Many Thaiisms can be seen in contemporary Thai-Mon (Rāmañ) on all levels of the language. It is not impossible therefore that the Thai aspect marker for 'new situation' (NSIT, s. Jenny 2001:124ff) has influenced the use of Mon *raʔ*, which today serves as standard translation of Thai *เล็ด* 'NSIT' in most contexts.

3. Modern Mon

Let us now consider more extensive language data from modern Mon, showing the functions of *raʔ* and *noŋ*. We will see that the earlier descriptions of *raʔ* as 'assertive' particle cannot be sustained, nor can Bauer's statements about the 'aspectual colouring' and restrictions concerning co-occurrence of *raʔ* and *noŋ* with each other and with the negative marker *hùʔ*. It will be seen that *raʔ* can be analysed as a particle marking focus.⁵ Where *raʔ* seems to exhibit aspectual or temporal values, this can be explained as either an implicature or as a result of influence from the dominant neighbouring languages Burmese and Thai. *noŋ* does not inherently express futurity (though this may be implicated in many contexts), but rather puts emphasis on the truth of the statement. There seems to be an undertone of uncertainty in *noŋ*, which may be an implicature rather than the primary function of the particle. Actually *noŋ* may be said to override the uncertainty of the statement. Based on the linguistic data examined, I take *noŋ* to be an assertive particle.

3.1 The focal particle *raʔ*

The focal particle *raʔ* can occur in a wide range of clauses, and it is very frequent in sentence final position. In this case, the whole predication (or core in Role and Reference Grammar terminology, s. Van Valin and LaPolla 1997) is marked as (low) focal, which may be considered the default for any utterance. The topic-deictic marker *kəh* can be used to mark a topic in fronted position or *in situ*, as in the next sentence, where it simply marks a nominal expression as known/old information.

⁵See Van Valin and LaPolla 1997 for a detailed account of focus structure.

- (5) mətɔka yətha kɾip mən ʔətao kəh **raʔ**.
 SM motorcar train run STAY on.top TOP FOC
 ‘Cars and trains run up there.’

This sentence was uttered talking about Japan, which the speaker describes as a big island where cars and trains are running. *raʔ* here marks the whole predication as FOCUS, contradicting the expectation that ‘there are no cars and trains on an island’. The focus marker in (5) has, to some degree at least, counter-expectative function.

- (6) ŋuə-yèh tɿʔ pèh tɛh tɛk **raʔ**.⁶
 SM tomorrow that 2 HIT beat FOC
 ‘Tomorrow you’ll be beaten up.’

Sentence (6) is about a nightly excursion from the temple where the speaker was living as a temple boy. The kids are caught and the above threat is uttered by the one who found them. The sentence clearly has future time reference, as can be seen from the use of the temporal adverbial *ŋuə-yèh* ‘tomorrow’. The use of *raʔ* in this context stresses the inevitability of the (future) event.

That *raʔ* is not inherently a marker of ‘new situation’ (at least in Burmese SM) is demonstrated in the following sentence.

- (7) təh mən plà **raʔ** lèy.
 SM be STAY young.man FOC EMPH
 ‘We were (still) young men back then, that’s it.’

The speaker, a 76 year old man, talks about his life when he was still young. In this context the contrast is clearly ‘then – now’ (young man – old man), not ‘earlier – then’ (child – young man). The expression *təh mən plà raʔ* in another context may very well be understood as ‘he has grown into a young man’, indicating a NSIT reading.

The use of *raʔ* in questions excludes its definition as ‘assertive particle’.

- (8) ləkəh jəh pəkom hət-hət **raʔ** ha?
 SM then person CAUS:associate quiet-RDP FOC Q
 ‘Did they assemble all quietly at that time?’

The use of *raʔ* here indicates narrow focus on the adverbial ‘quietly’ with a counter-expectative connotation. It is unexpected that at the time of the Burmese re-occupation (after the British and Japanese had left in 1948) the Mon could assemble without the enemy knowing about it.

⁶In modern Mon and Burmese, only the 1st person pronouns make a distinction between singular and plural. I use 1s, 1pl for the first person and 2, 3 for the others. The translation depends on the context.

In negative contexts, *raʔ* often seems to have an undertone of NSIT (‘not anymore’). This is clearly the case in (9a) and (to a lesser degree) in (10a).

- (9a) kwan poy ʔətɿʔ hùʔ mùə **raʔ**, dɛh hɔm.
 SM village 1pl there NEG one FOC 3 speak
 ‘Our village (country, home) over there does not exist anymore, they said.’

The Japanese in Monland complain about the destruction of their country by the nuclear bombs. Clearly they used to have their “village” there (in Japan) before, but at the time of utterance their home has been destroyed. *raʔ* here puts more emphasis on the statement, giving it more importance. The NSIT connotation is implicative, although one might think of Burmese influence. The Burmese standard translation of (9a) is given below. Notice the use of the focus marker *tó* to mark NSIT in negative contexts.⁷ The proper NSIT marker *pyi* does not occur in negative contexts in colloquial Burmese (Okell 1969:385).

- (9b) hou-hma tóu-yé ywa mǎ-hyí **tó** /**pyi* hpù, thu-tóu
 B⁸ that-LOC 1pl-POSS village NEG-exist NSIT NEG 3-PL
 pyò te.
 speak REAL

- (10a) dɛh hùʔ kɔ həyèh **raʔ**.
 SM 3 NEG GIVE sing FOC
 ‘He didn’t allow us to sing anymore.’

The translation of (10a) is natural, but it implicates that he (in this context the abbot of the temple) allowed the boys to sing before, which is not the case. True is that the boys did actually sing before they were caught, and now they cannot anymore. The Burmese translation in this case would most naturally include *tó*, as in (9a):

- (10b) thu pèi mǎ-hsou **tó** hpù.
 B 3 GIVE NEG-sing NSIT NEG

In sentence (11), taken from the historical novel about King Dhammaceti, Queen Mi Cao Pu had been abducted by the Burmese king of Pagán, and her foster son, the monk Piṭakadhara, brought her back to Pegu. They waited outside the town until everything was ready for the big reception of the queen.

This example clearly demonstrates that also in negative contexts <ra> has no inherent NSIT meaning. The presence of the persistive marker <ṇim> ‘yet’, definitely excludes a reading as ‘new situation’. Notice that in the

⁷Burmese *tó* may actually be related to Mon *raʔ*, i.e. it may be derived from or influenced by OM *da*. In connected speech, *tó* is usually pronounced *ró*, approaching the Mon form also phonetically.

⁸B = Burmese

Burmese translation of this sentence the use of *tó* is impossible, as *tó* cannot co-occur with the persistive marker *thèi*.

(11a) hwa' lup ðuñ prah-prah ñim **ra**.
LM NEG enter town early-RDP PERS FOC

(11b) thu-tóu myóu htè-kou myan-myan mǎ-win
B 3-PL town inside-GOAL fast-RDP NEG-enter
thèi hpù.
PERS NEG

‘They were not in a hurry to enter the town yet.’

The focus marker *raʔ* can be used to form strong imperatives that do not allow contradiction. Sentence (12a) is from the temple boy’s narrative again. The boys are playing and the senior monk sends out another monk to call them. The use of the familiar 2nd person pronoun *6èʔ* together with *raʔ* reinforces the urgency of the order.

(12a) ʔəkùn kok mən, ʔa **raʔ** 6èʔ tɔʔ!
SM monk call STAY go FOC 2fam PL
‘The monk is calling you; go now!’

The situational context of (13a) implies NSIT reading of the prohibitive. The monks were out on an extended alms round and the accompanying temple boys who had to carry the donations back to the temple get their share of pocket money. The speaker got only 100 Kyat and asked for more.

(13a) 6èʔ paʔ ket **raʔ** lèy!
SM 2fam PROH take FOC EMPH
‘Don’t take anymore!’

As the boy has already got his 100 Kyat, the meaning is clearly that he must not ask for more, not that he must not ask for money at all. In both (12b) and (13b) the Burmese translation includes *tó*:

(12b) hpòuncì hko nei te, thin-tóu thwà **tó** lei!
B monk call STAY REAL 2-PL go FOC EMPH

(13b) thin mǎ-yu né **tó**!
B 2 NEG-take PROH NSIT

Without verb, *raʔ* can mark a noun/noun phrase as predicate. In the next sentence, the speaker is talking about a pagoda the Japanese built near Thanbyuzayat during the occupation of southern Burma.

(14a) kyac kòh mùʔ kyac hùʔ tɛm, kyac kyəpan
SM pagoda TOP what pagoda NEG know pagoda Japan
raʔ.
FOC

‘I don’t know what pagoda that was, [it was just] a Japanese pagoda.’

Sentence (14a) would be ungrammatical without *raʔ*, as would be (15a), the answer to ‘What aeroplane was it that crashed at Ko’ Dot?’.

- (15a) 6ɛŋ-kya ʔɛŋkəlòc **raʔ**.
 SM ship-wind England FOC
 ‘It was an English aeroplane.’

The narrow focal function of *raʔ* is illustrated in (16a). Having finished his story, the speaker asks if it was OK, as he didn’t know anything else to tell. Notice the use of *raʔ* after the initial adverbial and after the verbal complex of the sentence.

- (16a) ʔəkhak nɔʔ raʔ, lèə kʲəʔ **raʔ**.
 SM manner this FOC tell GET FOC
 ‘That’s it, that’s how I can tell stories.’

The most common Burmese translations of sentences (14a) – (16a) involve the use of the particle *pè*, which marks nominal predicates and (restricted) focal elements (often translated as ‘just, only’):

- (14b) hou hpǎyà ba hpǎyà lè mǎ-thí hpù, cǎpan
 B that pagoda what pagoda Q NEG-know NEG Japan
 hpǎyà **pè**.
 pagoda FOC
- (15b) ingǎlei’ lei-yin **pè**.
 B England wind-vehicle FOC
- (16b) di-lou myòu **pè** pyò ta’ te.
 B this-ADV kind FOC speak able REAL

Summary of *raʔ*

Since at least the 11th century, the particle *da/raʔ* was used in Mon in a wide range of functions. Already in the early Pagán inscriptions we encounter the particle in statements as well as imperative and prohibitive contexts. In OM, *da* does not seem to occur in negated sentences, a restriction that is not found in the modern language and may be due to the limited data available of earlier stages of the language. In LM and SM *da* is always clause/phrase final and fully stressed, usually receiving high pitch and sometimes lengthening of the vowel. Bauer (1982:438f) states that “in no instance ever does *raʔ* lose its final glottal stop, an important prosodic feature for the delimitation of clauses and sentences (Grenzsignal)”. The analysis of *raʔ* as focus marker is consistent with its being in direct opposition with the topic marker *kəh*.⁹ This opposition is illustrated in sentences (15c) and (16c), in which the focus marker of the original (15a) and (16a) has been replaced by the topic marker. Notice that the replacement results in a phrase that cannot in

⁹*kəh* is the modern reflex of the OM deictic/topic marker *goh*, *goḥ* ‘that, the aforementioned’ (DMI:82f).

itself constitute a sentence. Unlike *raʔ*, the topic marker is not usually stressed, even in sentence final position, receiving low pitch.

- (15c) 6ɛŋ-kya ʔɛŋkəlòc **kðh**
 SM ship-wind England TOP
 ‘as for that English aeroplane, ...’

- (16c) ʔəkhak nɔʔ **kðh** lèə kʔʔ **raʔ**.
 SM manner this TOP tell GET FOC
 ‘Well, I can tell stories like that.’

Besides the functions listed above, *raʔ* appears in a few idiomatic expressions, all usually in clause initial position: *yð raʔ* ‘if’, *ʔɔn raʔ* ‘though’ (usually with *kɔm lèy* at the end of the clause), *hətðh raʔ* ‘thus, this being the case’.

In combination with the prefix *ʔiʔ*, *raʔ* has developed aspectual value as NSIT marker (in the form *ʔiʔraʔ/yaʔ*, s. Jenny 2003, 2005).

3.2 The assertive particle *noŋ*

The use of *noŋ* is much more restricted than that of *raʔ* in the modern language, both in SM and LM. *noŋ* can mark a statement as definitive, as in (17). The speaker reinforces a statement made by his wife about the medicine of the English, which “would defeat all diseases.”

- (17) həʔuy dɛh khəh mən **noŋ**.
 SM medicine 3 good STAY ASRT
 ‘Their medicine was definitely good.’

Clearly there is no future or irrealis connotation in this statement. The same is true for (18), with the LM spelling <roŋ> for SM *noŋ*. The sentence is from the cover of a religious text printed in Moulmein in 1989.

- (18) gakom rāmañadhammācariya ʔalum desa raḥ
 LM association R. whole province state
 man phan-phak tuy ma pḍuiw buim cak
 Mon arrange FINISH ATTR press image machine
 tak traḥ ptit **roŋ**.
 beat spread CAUS:EXIT ASRT
 ‘Compiled, printed, published and distributed by the Ramanya
 Dhammacariya association of Monland.’

This and similar sentences appear often on the cover of printed Mon books. One could possibly construe a prospective reading for the second part of the sentence, which temporally follows the first part ending in <tuy>, along the lines ‘after compiling, the association will publish’, but the sentence as a whole certainly does not have future reference.

In the next sentence, habitual reading is the most natural interpretation, given the subject ‘everyone’. That the habitual is not in the

meaning of *noŋ* (though it is compatible with it) is evident from the possibility of omitting *noŋ* or replacing it with *raʔ*. The sentence is part of the description of a beautiful but cunning young girl.

- (19) 'arew cnāy kon-ñāk brau ma huim ñā,
LM speech deceit child female ATTR speak CAUS:GO
jmāp ñah ma miñ pateh tau **ron̄**.
every person ATTR hear believe STAND ASRT
'Everyone who heard the deceitful words of that girl believed her.'

Both (18) and (19) allow an interpretation of *noŋ* describing an event that follows another event, apparently giving relative temporal value to the particle. The next sentence seems to support this interpretation. The speaker describes his journey from Monland to Thailand. Here it is made explicit by the use of *toə teh* 'and then' that the walking followed a prior action/event, in this case riding a boat. Clearly the absolute time reference of the utterance is past, as the speaker already is in Thailand at the time.

- (20) toə teh ʔuə kwac klɔŋ **noŋ**.
SM FINISH COND 1s walk COME ASRT
'And then I walked here.'

Although *noŋ* is compatible with and in some cases leads to an inference of relative future, relative tense is not part of the semantics of *noŋ*. In the next example, it merely reinforces the certainty (or overrides the uncertainty) of the speaker that it really was the temple boys who had stolen and eaten his Bael fruit.

- (21) kwah phèə toʔ klət ɕiəʔ mən̄ həʔɔt **noŋ**.
SM pupil temple PL steal eat STAY ADV:all ASRT
'The temple boys stole and ate them all (I'm sure).'

In (22), the non-success of the intended action is not implied by the use of *noŋ* but rather by the broader context. Even if *noŋ* was replaced by *raʔ* in the same sentence, the meaning would remain unchanged. The use of *noŋ* merely emphasises the fact that the speaker did really (try to) stop the passing cars.

- (22) hətɔʔ ka dɛh tɔʔ **noŋ**, ka dɛh hùʔ hətɔʔ
SM CAUS:stop car 3 that ASRT car 3 NEG CAUS:stop
kɔ.
GIVE
'We tried to stop their car, but they wouldn't stop their car (for us).'

In connection with the preverbal modal *tèh* 'hit; must; PASSIVE', *noŋ* is often used to reinforce the obligative modal interpretation 'must', although this does not exclude the passive reading. The use of *tèh ... noŋ* 'must' in the following sentence seems to be influenced by the parallel Burmese

construction *yá me* ‘must’, where the irrealis marker *me* is used to get the obligative reading against *yá te* with realis marker ‘can, ABILITIVE’ (s. Okell 1969:456f; Okell and Allott 2001:178f).¹⁰ (23) is from the introduction of the historical novel about Dhammaceti:

- (23) *daḥ khyū jan chak ’ā gata te’ roṇ.*
 LM HIT write compose continue GO front that ASRT
 ‘I do have to go on writing and composing.’

Sentence (24) reports the advice of an officer at a meeting with the Mon leaders, telling them to separate from the Burmese if they were really interested in gaining independence. The first part of the sentence shows a rare occurrence *noŋ* in a conditional context. This obvious contradiction to the analysis of *noŋ* as assertive marker remains to be explained. As it is the only instance of *noŋ* in a non-assertive context in the data, its status is not certain. Probably the conditional is superimposed on the assertion and it is to be interpreted along the line ‘if you really say that...’.

- (24) *lùp lə cət noŋ teh tēh pac tho? noŋ.*
 SM enter KEEP heart ASRT COND HIT separate THROW ASRT
 ‘If you are really interested, you have to separate for good.’

The co-occurrence of *ra?* and *noŋ* is rare, but not ungrammatical, as the following examples illustrate. In (25) the speaker is not quite sure about the correctness of his interpretation and therefore uses *noŋ* to give more weight to his statement. In sentence (26), too, a slight dubitative or assumptive undertone may be heard, which is not expressed by *noŋ* itself; *noŋ* rather serves to override this dubitative undertone.

- (25) *yəmù? kyəpan kəh chàn teh hnòk ra? noŋ, ?uə*
 SM name Japan TOP *chan* COND big FOC ASRT 1s
 həya? rəŋ.
 think LOOK
 ‘The Japanese, if they had a *chan*¹¹ attached to their names,
 they were important people, I think.’
- (26) *kyac hətəm lə ra? noŋ.*
 SM monk remember KEEP FOC ASRT
 ‘The monk still remembers me, I’m sure/I think.’

With nominal predicates, the function of *noŋ* seems to be very close to that of *ra?*. The only difference is that it perhaps puts more emphasis on the (asserted) truth of the statement. (27) is the answer to the question whether it was the Japanese guards who scattered the rice of the English prisoners.

¹⁰There is some dialectal variation as to the use of REALIS vs. IRREALIS markers for abilitive and obligative readings respectively. The correlation seems to be more consistent in southern Burma than in other regions.

¹¹It is not clear which Japanese word the speaker is talking about. Having only learnt a few words and expressions during the Japanese occupation over fifty years ago, his knowledge of Japanese is far from perfect. Probably he is referring to the suffix 様 *-san* ‘Mr., Mrs., Ms.’.

- (27) həʔeh, ɬəʔ kəh ʔeŋkəlòc **noŋ**.
 SM no PREF TOP English ASRT
 ‘No, it was the English (themselves who did it).’

In (28) the speaker is talking about a man who remained in Monland after the war. The previous assertion was that there was a Japanese man still living in the area.

- (28) krək **noŋ**, ʔey ʔiʔkəh kəh.
 SM Chinese ASRT eh NML:TOP TOP
 ‘That is a Chinese (not a Japanese), that one.’

Apparently *noŋ* is incompatible with imperative and interrogative contexts, adding weight to its analysis as assertive marker.

There are a few instances in the data of *noŋ* in negated sentences, e.g. in the MM Shwedagon inscription (Lu Hpei Win 1958). The passage is not very clear and the reading less than sure. The general context has past tense reference, speaking of monks in former times when they did not receive any alms on their rounds.

- (29) ñah ma kuiw dān ha-mwoy **rw[o]ñ**.
 MM person ATTR give donation NEG-one ASRT
 ‘There was no one to give donations.’

Other examples of *noŋ* in negated contexts are (30) and (31), both taken from a Mon newspaper published in 2002.

- (30) mu katuiw dah ku ñah ta’ro gah puiy hwa’ gwa’
 LM what arise be OBL person PL Q TOP 1pl NEG GET
 tim ket khyuit-pluit **roñ**.
 know TAKE certainly ASRT
 ‘We cannot ourselves know for sure what happened to them.’

- (31) yaw ra smān kon ɖuñ yūrop ta’ man gah mu
 LM if FOC ask child county Europe PL Mon TOP what
 ro mgañ ñah ta’ hwa’ tim **roñ**.
 Q ATTR:SAY person PL NEG know ASRT
 ‘If you ask Europeans “What are the Mon?” they don’t know it.’

The use of *noŋ* in negated sentences in SM is illustrated in (32), a spontaneous statement of the abbot of a monastery at the Thai-Burmese border about a rope he just made out of a plastic bag to carry heavy bunches of bananas. Reverend Mahe is obviously very certain about the strength of his rope (and equally proud of it) and his statement is an answer to doubtful looks from the person who received the bananas.

- (32) ɖəh hùʔ pət **noŋ**.
 SM 3 NEG break ASRT
 ‘It is not going to break for sure!’

The use of *noŋ* in negated sentences is not incompatible with its analysis as assertive marker. The corresponding utterances can be paraphrased as ‘I state that it is a fact that x does/did not V’.

The particle *noŋ* shares the clause final slot with the interrogative markers *ha* and *rao*, and the common imperative/politeness marker *ɲiʔ* ‘a little bit’ with which it cannot co-occur. This indicates that *noŋ* is best analysed as a marker of illocutionary force, namely of ‘assertion’. In this function, *noŋ* can occur in both verbal and nominal clauses. Like the other IF markers, *noŋ* is usually fully stressed, and often receives vowel lengthening and high pitch.

4. Conclusion

Both particles under discussion here are the result of irregular developments from OM and MM, a fact that concurs with their unstable semantics. The actual value of *raʔ* and *noŋ* in a given clause/sentence mainly depends on the (pragmatic) interpretation of the broader context, both linguistic and extra-linguistic.

The only instance where *raʔ* and *noŋ* do appear to share the same syntactical slot is in nominal predicates, which can end in either of the two particles. This is also the only case where the use of either *raʔ* or *noŋ* is compulsory. The use of *raʔ* in nominal predicates usually leads to a neutral, the use of *noŋ* to a more emphatic or dubitative reading. This can be explained by the fact that *raʔ* is much more frequent than *noŋ*, which makes the latter a more powerful marker than the former.

The clause particles *raʔ* and *noŋ* were described by earlier authors in different ways. They were usually taken to be mutually exclusive, occupying the same slot in a sentence. Most authors analysed *raʔ* and *noŋ* as sentence particles indicating different degrees of assertion, sometimes with aspecto-temporal connotations. I have shown in this paper that neither are the two morphemes mutually exclusive, nor do they have inherent aspectual or temporal (or modal) value. The particle *raʔ* is analysed here as a focal particle, the use of which may have been influenced by neighbouring languages. The particles *raʔ* and *noŋ* serve as standard translations for a number of Burmese and Thai morphemes that cover similar (but not identical) functions. The influence must be seen on a more abstract structural level rather than as direct ‘loan translations’ or calques. In a largely bilingual society ‘standard translations’, however accurate or inaccurate, arise easily and become part of common language usage also in monolingual contexts.¹² The vast field of contact phenomena and mutual influence among the languages of Southeast Asia is still largely unexplored and leaves much space for future research in this area.

¹²Asked about the meaning of *noŋ*, which one informant used unusually often in elicited sentences, he stated that in Burmese one “uses *noŋ* a lot”, although not all Burmese sample sentences included the Burmese irrealis marker *me*.

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